

## **FISH and WILDLIFE COMMISSION AGENDA ITEM COVER SHEET**

**Meeting Date:** April 14, 2017

**Agenda Item:** Grant Marsh Wildlife Management Area Addition (R5)

**Division:** Wildlife

**Action Needed:** Final

**Time Needed on Agenda for this Presentation:** 10 Min

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### **Background**

FWP proposes to purchase by fee title approximately 425 acres in Bighorn County. The project received Commission endorsement in April 2016. The original endorsement was for approximately 392 acres, but an addition from the same seller increased the total to approximately 425 acres. The primary purpose of this acquisition is to conserve one of the largest blocks of intact riparian habitat remaining in the Bighorn River Valley while broadening the conservation footprint of the existing Grant Marsh Wildlife Management Area. A productive complement of wildlife habitat including mature cottonwood galleries and native shrub thickets exist on the property, as well as nearly two miles of river frontage. The addition of this property would expand public hunting opportunity and facilitate fishing, birdwatching, boating and other outdoor recreational activities in perpetuity.

The appraised value of the proposed acquisition is \$1,572,000. Approximately 25% of the funding for this project would be derived from the 2013 Habitat Montana spending authorization, which allows for fee title and other types of acquisition. U.S. Fish and Wildlife Service Pittman-Robertson dollars and other partner contributions would contribute toward the remaining 75% of this proposed purchase.

### **Public Involvement Process & Results**

FWP released a Draft Environmental Assessment for public comment from January 24 to February 24, and included public hearings in Billings and Hardin February 13 and 16, respectively. The Draft EA was made available to neighboring landowners and interested parties, and the EA was posted on the FWP webpage. FWP received 49 written public comments from individuals and organizations. Twenty oral comments were received at public meetings and one oral comment was received via a telephone call. Of these 70 public comments 65 were in support of the acquisition, two were neutral and three were opposed. The three opposing comments identified questions, issues or concerns that are addressed in the Decision Notice and Final EA.

### **Alternatives and Analysis**

Two alternatives were analyzed and considered in the EA: A) No Action— Under the No Action Alternative, FWP would not purchase the property. The landowner would continue to seek another buyer. There would be no assurance the land would be managed for wildlife or that public access would be provided in perpetuity B) Proposed Action— FWP proposes to purchase approximately 425 acres to manage as part of the adjacent Grant Marsh WMA. Through the Proposed Action, FWP would secure permanent public access to this land and an additional reach of the Bighorn River. Management efforts would include protecting and enhancing the riparian community and actively managing existing agricultural land to benefit wildlife. A Decision Notice selecting the Proposed Action was issued on March 9.

### **Agency Recommendation & Rationale**

FWP recommends the Commission approve the purchase of the proposed Grant Marsh Wildlife Management Area Addition to protect, enhance, and preserve high value wildlife habitats and provide public access for a variety of outdoor recreational activities in perpetuity.

### **Proposed Motion**

I move the Fish and Wildlife Commission approve the purchase of the Grant Marsh Wildlife Management Area Addition as proposed.